THE
Dan Smoot Report

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DAN SMOOT

THE POVERTY WAR'S JOAN OF ARC

In November, 1968, when Texas voters rejected a constitutional amendment to raise the state's welfare spending, the Dallas Legal Services Project (a poverty-war agency financed with tax money from the Office of Economic Opportunity) began organizing Negro welfare mothers in Dallas to demonstrate and protest. The tax-financed agency was assisted by two leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) — both of whom were convicted felons, out on appeals bonds.

On November 26, 1968, the two felons and four other SNCC militants stormed into the Dallas welfare office, followed by 20 Negro welfare mothers.

Mrs. Ruth Jefferson, leader of the mothers, has five children. She has been on welfare since 1964 — though she is young (30) and healthy, is a high school graduate, and has had one year of advanced business training and one year in college. Asked why she does not work, Mrs. Jefferson angrily replied that she does not have to work, because she has a right to welfare.

The demonstrators staged a sit-in. A court ordered them to leave the welfare office. They refused. Later, 21 of them (including Ruth Jefferson) were given 3-day suspended jail sentences for contempt.

In April, 1969 — still on welfare, and residing in a public housing project — Ruth Jefferson reported her income as $7956 a year, which is $2206 a year more than the maximum allowable income for a public-housing tenant. She also bought a 1968 automobile for $2700 cash. In that same month, federal agents found in Ruth Jefferson's apartment four shotguns and four sawed-off shotgun barrels. She was not prosecuted, however, or asked to vacate her apartment.

In July, 1969, Ordell Williams and a friend (both Negroes, and both tenants in the housing project where the Jefferson woman lived) collected 300 signatures of fellow tenants, asking that Ruth Jefferson be evicted.

The Dallas Housing Authority served notice of eviction because: (1) Mrs. Jefferson owed $415.28

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back rent on her $52-a-month apartment; (2) she used the apartment as a meeting hall for militants; (3) her presence in the project was a threat to other tenants who feared injury because of her activities; and (4) she permitted persons other than herself and children to reside in the apartment.

At eviction proceedings on August 1, 1969, Ordell Williams testified he had seen people coming in and out of the Jefferson apartment, carrying guns and displaying them on the street. He said Mrs. Jefferson and associates "were going around preaching hate." Other neighbors testified that the Jefferson apartment was a hangout for SNCC hoodlums and other black militants, who incited youngsters to violence.

Ruth Jefferson was evicted from the public-housing apartment. Crimes of violence in the housing project declined immediately.

On November 3, 1969, Ruth Jefferson went on the federal poverty-war payroll ($5400 a year, plus "car expenses") as a community organizer in the West Dallas housing project whence she had been evicted on August 1.

Robert Medrano, head of the West Dallas Poverty War Center, said Mrs. Jefferson was hired because of "her past performance as a community organizer." Medrano said:

"She has never been a member of SNCC. She only established communication with them. . . .

"I'm sure that there will be criticism of our choice, but we feel that the only people who have the right to judge are those living in the area she will serve."

Earnest Wallace, executive director of the Dallas County Community Action Committee (DCCAC, which is supposed to direct all poverty-war operations in Dallas) said his office had nothing to do with selecting Ruth Jefferson. He said:

"The screening committee at each of our neighborhood centers has the right to make these choices without consulting me at all if they desire.

"We have intentionally decentralized our program in this way to give low-income families more say about the people who serve them."

Among the people whom Mrs. Jefferson is now "serving" are, of course, her 300 former neighbors who petitioned for her eviction last summer.

DCCAC was designated, by the City of Dallas and the County of Dallas, as the ruling poverty-war agency in Dallas, authorized to receive funds from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. The city and county appoint one-third of the board members of the poverty-war agency; but the Dallas City Council (elected governing body of the City) and the Dallas County Commissioners Court (elected governing body of the County) have no authority over the federal poverty-war agency they created.

The Dallas City Council refused to pass a resolution concerning the Jefferson matter, because most Councilmen and the Mayor considered it none of their business. The Dallas County Commissioners Court unanimously adopted a resolution criticizing the hiring of Ruth Jefferson, but the autonomous federal war-on-poverty agency scorned the Court's criticism.

At first, U. S. Representatives from Dallas districts said the Jefferson affair was no business of the federal government, because Mrs. Jefferson "works for the local arm of the War on Poverty, and therefore does not come under federal jurisdiction." Later, U.S. Representative Jim Collins (Dallas Republican) asked the OEO in Washington to investigate.

Dallas City Councilman Jesse Price spoke out against the hiring of Ruth Jefferson. He said he got many calls in support of his position. One call, which Price characterized as typical, was from a woman who is a resident in the West Dallas housing project. She told Councilman Price that people in the housing project had "fear in their hearts because of Mrs. Jefferson's conduct and associates."

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Rules of the Dallas poverty-war agency prohibit the hiring of anyone who has been convicted of a felony, unless the "personnel advisory committee determines it advisable to waive this restriction."

Ruth Jefferson was convicted on a felony charge of shoplifting at Torrance, California, and was given a two-year probated sentence on November 21, 1964. These facts came to light after she was on the poverty-war payroll in Dallas. She had neglected to give the information when filling out her application form.

At a meeting of the executive committee of the Dallas poverty-war agency on November 6, 1969, a motion was made that Ruth Jefferson be suspended from her $5400-a-year federal job until her "status is cleared up." The motion was defeated by a voice vote.

One committee member (A. Maceo Smith, assistant regional administrator for equal opportunity in the Dallas regional office of the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) said the suspension of Mrs. Jefferson would "unnecessarily penalize this person because of the prejudicial situation for or against her."

Robert McMahan, deputy director of DCCAC, admitted that keeping Ruth Jefferson on the payroll was against the poverty-war agency's bylaws; but, he said, the bylaws should be waived in her case, because "ceasing of employment can cause hardships on an employee."

On November 10, Charles Galvin (Dean of Southern Methodist University Law School, chairman of the board of the Dallas poverty-war agency, and also chairman of its personnel advisory committee) said his committee had decided to recommend that Ruth Jefferson be retained in her poverty-war job, despite her criminal record.

On November 11, *The Dallas Morning News* learned that Ruth Jefferson was still on the Dallas County welfare rolls and that more than 200 pounds of free food would be delivered for her in West Dallas the next day — although she had been on the federal poverty-war payroll since November 3.

On November 12, Robert McMahan called a press conference to blast critics of the hiring of Ruth Jefferson as being "nonpoor" people, ignorant of what they were talking about.

McMahan defended the Jefferson woman on all counts. He said he considered her shoplifting in California a "minor offense," because, though it was a felony in California, it would have been a misdemeanor in Texas. He conceded that misdemeanor convictions disqualify persons for employment with Dallas poverty-war agencies, but said the rule had been waived in Mrs. Jefferson's case. He admitted that Ruth Jefferson had withheld information about her California criminal record when filling out her application form, but said the Dallas poverty-war agency believes there was "no evidence there was an intent to deceive." Despite all evidence and testimony to the contrary, McMahan asserted that Ruth Jefferson had never had any "direct involvement" with SNCC. Concerning complaints that Ruth Jefferson was still receiving welfare and free food, though on the federal payroll, Mr. McMahan explained that she was entitled to welfare until she actually received her first paycheck.

Speaking before the Dallas City Council on November 12, Bobby Norman (official of the Black Citizens for Justice, Law, and Order) assailed Councilman Jesse Price for making a "dastardly attack" on Ruth Jefferson, by notifying the newspapers of her California criminal record.

On the night of November 13, 1969, the executive board of the Dallas poverty-war agency met at the West Dallas Community Center to decide whether Ruth Jefferson should be kept on the payroll.

About 300 persons jammed the meeting room. They were mostly Negroes; but, among them, was a group of "brown berets," and a few silent whites.

Robert McMahan defended Ruth Jefferson, saying that all charges against her were "half-truths," and that an issue had been made of her

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hiring by white city politicians trying to buy votes from their white constituents.

McMahan drew thunderous applause from the spectators.

Othal Lakey (representing the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Dallas) also defended Mrs. Jefferson, saying:

"To all the charges that have been made against her, we say: So what?!

"You say she's a troublemaker.

"Yes, she is. But she makes the kind of trouble this city must have."

Lakey drew thunderous applause.

Sheffield Kadane and E. O. Cartwright (members of the executive board of the poverty-war agency) tried to make speeches opposing the hiring of Ruth Jefferson. The spectators drowned them out with catcalls, curses, and obscenities.

Cartwright tried to read a letter from Councilman Jesse Price detailing reasons why the hiring of Ruth Jefferson was unwise. He was hooted down. "I'm only trying to get the councilman's points into the record," Cartwright said. "Why don't you let me finish and then shout about it?"

"We don't want to hear what you have to say. Sit your *** down, honky," someone shouted.

Eventually, Dean Charles Galvin put the matter of retaining Ruth Jefferson to a vote of the executive board. He said the members would vote by secret ballot. A bushy-haired man in the audience shouted:

"Let them stand and be counted. . . . Why don't you want us to know who they are?"

Nonetheless, the board, for the first time in its history, voted by secret ballot. The result: 22-14 in favor of retaining Ruth Jefferson on the poverty-war payroll on the usual 90-day trial basis.

A victory whoop rocked the room when the vote was announced.

County Commissioner John Whittington said:

"The whole atmosphere of the place was intimidating. . . . I think the crowd would have turned on anyone on the floor who tried to express a different viewpoint."

County Commissioner Mel Price said a group of young men had tried to get him to go outside to "talk," but he refused. Price said:

"I don't normally get skittish over just anything; but . . . as the meeting broke up, I got the feeling I was in some foreign country."

County Welfare Director G. R. Coker said:

"It was sickening and embarrassing to participate in a board meeting in which intimidation and fear were the most obvious aspects of the discussions."

SOURCES

All information in this *Report* was taken from personal observation and interviews, and from issues of *The Dallas Morning News* and/or *The Dallas Times Herald* on Nov. 26, 27, 28, 1968; Dec. 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 1968; Jan. 28, 1969; Feb. 13, 1969; July 2, 1969; July 19, 1969; Aug. 1, 1969; Nov. 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 1969.

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